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U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of the Secretary

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I appreciate the opportunity to meet here with you today. The USDA is concerned with the well being of America's farmers, including pork producers. I am concerned about America's farmers and pork producers -- that's why I accepted the position as Assistant Secretary at USDA, and that's why I am happy to be here with you today.

Let me talk a moment about my responsibilities at the Department and how they might affect you as farmers and pork producers. Under my policy jurisdiction is the Meat and Poultry Inspection Program -- the program that is vested with the enormous responsibility and duty to assure the safety and wholesomeness of our nation's meat and poultry supply. I want you to know that I feel that duty and responsibility personally. I have great respect for American meat producers. You do a good job for the public. But my job involves evaluating -- using the best methods and research available -- any system, substance or product involved in meat or poultry production which may be harmful to the public health. Congress, speaking for the people, gave this important safety mandate to USDA and to the Meat and Poultry Inspection Program.

There are several areas where our actions seem to have aroused understandable concern on your part.

The first involves the use of sodium nitrite to cure meat products. The second is sulfa residues in swine meat. We at USDA know that we will be able to resolve both of these problems in a manner that protects public safety, builds public confidence that pork and cured meat products are safe and wholesome, and causes no major economic dislocation to pork producers. It is a tall order but we can do it.

Let me explain. First, I would like to go over for you why USDA is involved in regulating nitrites and sulfa. Second, I would like to explain what we have done and propose to do with regard to nitrites. Third, I would like to announce publicly to you today our plans for a Government-wide effort to reduce the percentage of sulfa residue violations and to help producers who have had violations avoid them in the future.

First, the Department of Agriculture is involved in regulating nitrites and sulfa because Congress has directed us to make certain that no adulterated or contaminated meat moves in commerce.

Remarks prepared for delivery by Carol Tucker Foreman, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Food and Consumer Services, before the National Pork Congress, Kansas City, Missouri, March 10, 1978 at 12 noon

Federal meat inspection functions were first created and given to USDA by Act of Congress over 70 years ago. Some people wonder why a Department set up to represent the interests of farmers was given this function of public health protection. Certainly, one good reason is that the law is designed to protect the good reputation of meat products and meat producers. It makes certain that you don't lose business because someone tries to get an economic advantage by selling an inferior or adulterated product. Imagine how many people would decide not to eat meat if they were afraid they would get sick from it. Obviously, meat producers want people to eat meat. Obviously, consumers want to eat meat. Meat is an excellent source of protein and iron and it tastes good. It is a highly desirable product. So public health protection in this case is also farmer and producer protection.

Now you may be wondering if industry protection was so vital, why has it been that only in the past year or so the problem of public health protection has gotten so much attention and caused you so much trouble. Well, the first answer is that it hasn't happened just over the past year or so. Surely, we all remember our history lesson about the first meat inspection act which was passed because of Upton Sinclair's revelations in his book The Jungle, about filthy meat packing plants. One of the reasons for the early meat inspection laws was to stop meat packers from using dangerous chemicals such as formaldehyde to give bad meat a fresh appearance. Public health issues, such as chemicals in meat, are not new. They simply involve different chemicals today. We must work together to resolve the problems we face. Ignoring problems, denying them, hoping they will go away are really not answers.

Even if I left USDA today and John Soorholtz took my place, there would still be public concern about the safety and quality of food. Reporters would still ask questions, congressional committees would still demand to know why we allow meat with nitrite or sulfa residues on the market. There would still be a law to enforce and a market to be preserved. Our goal must be to carry out the law in a way that will protect the public and build confidence in the food supply while not causing major dislocation to producers and processors.

The meat inspection law states that we shall not approve as wholesome any product that contains a substance that may be injurious to health.

Nitrites alone are not injurious to health. In some products, however, they can combine with other substances to form a powerful cancer-causing substance known as nitrosamines. Since nitrites have the virtue of providing a desirable taste and color and some protection from botulism, we want a system where we can have those benefits with the assurance of no nitrosamines.

We have asked the meat packing industry to show that we can continue to use nitrites with no nitrosamine formation. We expect that they will be able to do so -- either by using ascorbate and perhaps Alpha tocopherol to block the formation of nitrosamines or by reducing the use of nitrites, or by a combination of these factors. At the very worst, we might have to find ways to manufacture cured meat products using substitutes for nitrites. Some small packing companies do this now and do it very successfully.

Stories have appeared in the media saying that USDA might "ban bacon." Those are not our words, nor our sentiments. We feel confident that the public will continue to have cured meats, including bacon.

Our goal is to have cured meats in a way that preserves consumer confidence. If the public fears that there is a threat in eating cured meat, they won't eat it. We must assure safety to preserve the market for your products.

Now let's turn to sulfa. We at the USDA know how important sulfa is to you in preventing such diseases as atrophic rhinitis. We want you to continue to have access to sulfa drugs. No one wants to see them removed from the market.

Once again, however, the Meat Inspection Act requires that meat not contain any substance that may be harmful to health. Sulfa residues can cause allergic reactions in some people. If someone gets sick from eating pork, or thinks they might get sick, they won't eat pork. They'll choose a substitute. I think the solution to the sulfa residue problem must be a way for pork producers to use sulfa with no residues above the accepted tolerance.

USDA is committed to a strong course of action to achieve this. Today, I want to announce to you a Government-wide action plan to eliminate the troublesome and persistent problem involving sulfa residues.

Let's look at the problems you have told us that you are having with the sulfa residue testing program and see how USDA, with your valuable assistance, can solve them.

First, the period of time it takes to get test results back to the producer has been too long. So we will commit more resources to our testing program in order to cut down the turn-around time. We will also make greater efforts to notify a producer promptly by telephone (backed up by a registered letter) whenever a violation is discovered. We want to work closely with you in dealing with these problems.

But you also have to work with us. We know that when violations are discovered, some producers have been changing routes or using other producers as middlemen to get their animals into commercial channels.

This practice involves only a small minority of producers, but it has become a significant problem. The deliberate diversion of pork with residues into the market is the main reason we have to ask for legislative authority to quarantine herds and premises when a residue problem has been identified, and the authority to require owner identification of all livestock. We would like to avoid that legislation by seeing the residue problem disappear.

Second, I have met with the leaders of all the pertinent U.S. Government agencies and we have developed a program that will help us help you avoid residue violations. We have developed a coordinated program to use all of the USDA's extensive resources to do this. On Wednesday, Secretary Bergland gave us his approval to move ahead with our action plan. Most of you know Dr. Frank Mulhern of the Department's APHIS. He is a man of great talent and experience in dealing with animal health problems. He and his agency have led the fight to eliminate hog cholera. He will now coordinate a new program using many of the same techniques to help eliminate sulfa residue violations.

As you know 10 to 15 percent of swine slaughtered since 1973 have had violative levels of sulfa residues.

We have not done a very good job of finding out why this is the case. In part that is because FDA only investigates violations to determine if there is a need for prosecution. FSQS really only carries out its functions at the slaughterhouse and APHIS only has authority to deal with disease control. As a result, there has been no comprehensive evaluation of the total problem on the farm. In addition, we have not found adequate ways to work with producers. And producers fear that if they are open about their problems, they won't be able to market their hogs.

The new USDA program will work with FDA and producer groups and feed and sulfa manufacturers to:

1. Conduct a study of the factors causing residue violations and train personnel to identify these sources to producers who have violations.
2. Carry out an information campaign to let producers know about steps needed to avoid violations. This will include fact sheets, background materials, slide presentations and other methods.
3. Conduct research studies on such problems as recycling of sulfa thru feces and urine; feed manufacturing practices; dose levels and time of withdrawal.

FDA, APHIS, FSQS, Extension and ARS will all play a role. We want and Dr. Mulhern has sought your advice and counsel too. We want a practical, realistic and workable program to aid swine farmers when violative levels are found at slaughter and to help producers prevent a recurrence.

We believe the program I've outlined will succeed. We want to work with you in this and the Department has assigned the lead role to a man who we know has your confidence.

Finally, the USDA will seek to create a joint task force of producers, feed and drug manufacturers and consumers to review the sulfa program. The NPC has sought this action and we are glad to comply, working together I believe this is a problem that can be overcome. We believe this approach will make it possible to carry out the dual responsibilities of USDA -- to protect and promote the interests of producers and to assure the safety and quality of food for the American public.

The fact is that I believe that, by working together, we can resolve virtually any problem that arises. I have never accepted the position that farmers and the people who consume their products must be in conflict. I would like to prove I am right. If I am, we will all benefit.

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